

Oversight Hearing on the District of Columbia's Gun Control Laws

Testimony of

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before the

Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

June 28, 2005

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is John R. Lott, Jr.. I am a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Thank you very much for inviting me to discuss the current ban on handguns in the District of Columbia. There has been a lot of concern that “allowing broader gun ownership in the District of Columbia would lead to more shootings.”¹ The claim is that the ban has been an important tool in reducing violent crime and murder in the city.

Since September 24, 1976, D.C. residents have lived under the nation's most restrictive gun laws: Police enforce a citywide handgun ban, and local statutes require residents to keep long guns disassembled, unloaded and locked up. The law even forbids target shooting.

D.C.'s gun-control regime has aroused surprisingly little controversy until recently. Had the law worked, the relative lack of controversy wouldn't surprise anyone. But, if one looks at the data, it is clear that the law hasn't done anything to reduce violence. Over the last five years, the District, never far out of the running, had in three of those years the highest murder rate among cities over 500,000 people. The other two years the city ranked second and third. It seems clear that D.C. residents need more protection than they are receiving.

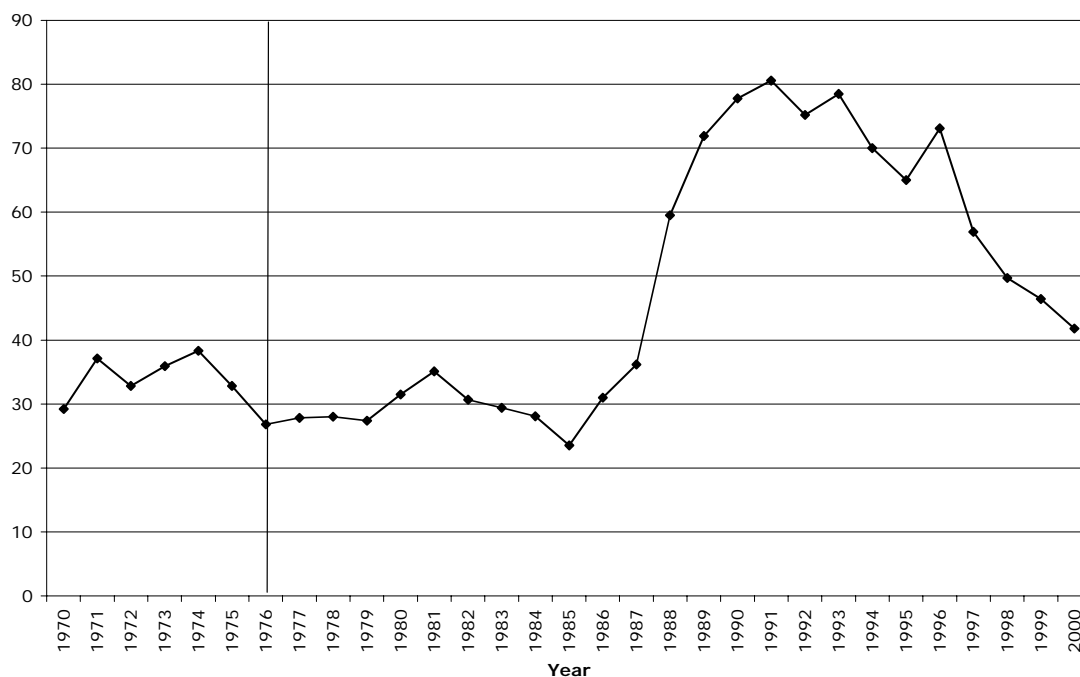
Nor has there been any success in Chicago, the only other major city to have roughly similar laws, and a city that has consistently had the highest murder rate of the U.S. ten largest cities.

Even more importantly, one can also look at how crime rates have varied in these cities over time. In D.C., crime has risen significantly since the gun ban went into effect. In the five years before the D.C.

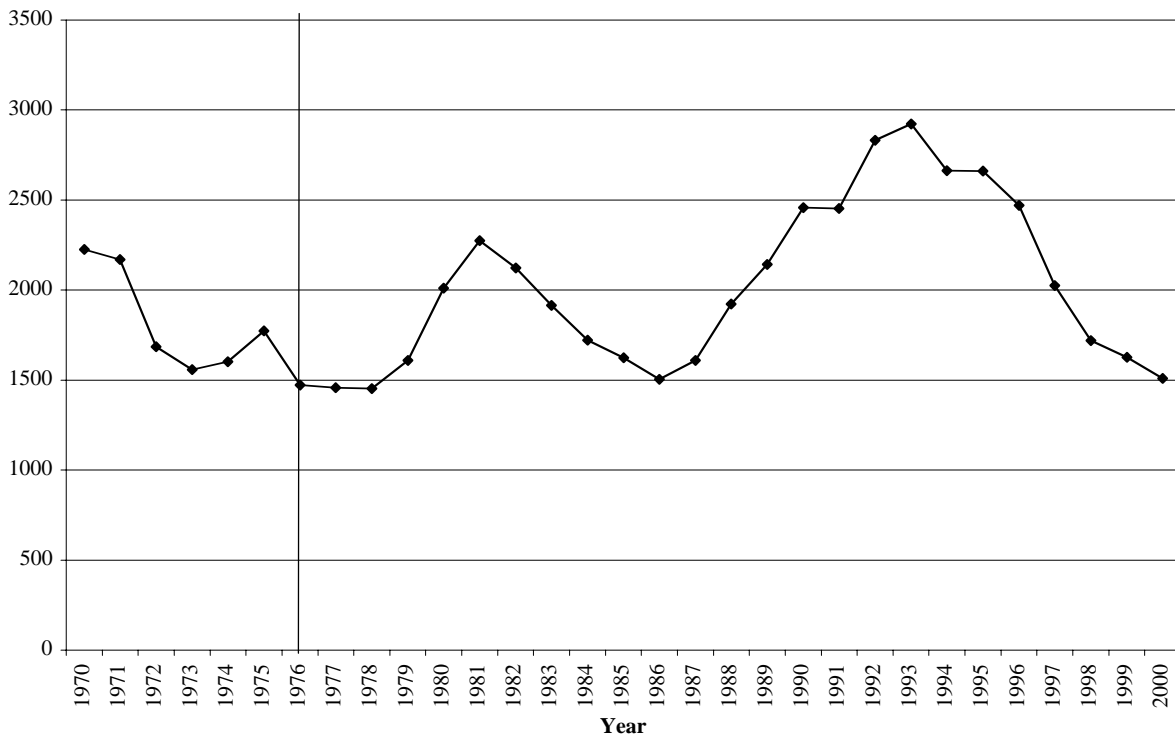
¹ Jacob Adelman, “D.C. delegate and allies counter bill to end gun ban,” Associated Press, June 16, 2005.

ban in late 1976, the murder rate was slightly declining: the rate fell from 37 to 27 per 100,000. But in the five years after the ban went into effect, the murder rate rose back up to 35. In fact, while crime rates have fluctuated over time, the murder rate after 1976 has only once fallen below what it was in 1976. The preliminary estimate of a 35 per 100,000 people murder rate in 2004 is still well above what the murder rate was when the handgun ban went into effect. (The explosion in murder during the late 1980s was likely due to the crack cocaine problem, which was a nationwide problem, particularly in urban areas such as D.C..)

D.C. murder rate (per 100,000 people)



D.C.'s Violent Crime Rate (per 100,000 people)



Robberies and overall violent crime changed just as dramatically. Robberies in the five years before the ban fell from 1,514 to 1,003 per 100,000 and then rose by over 63 percent, up to 1,635 in the five years after it.

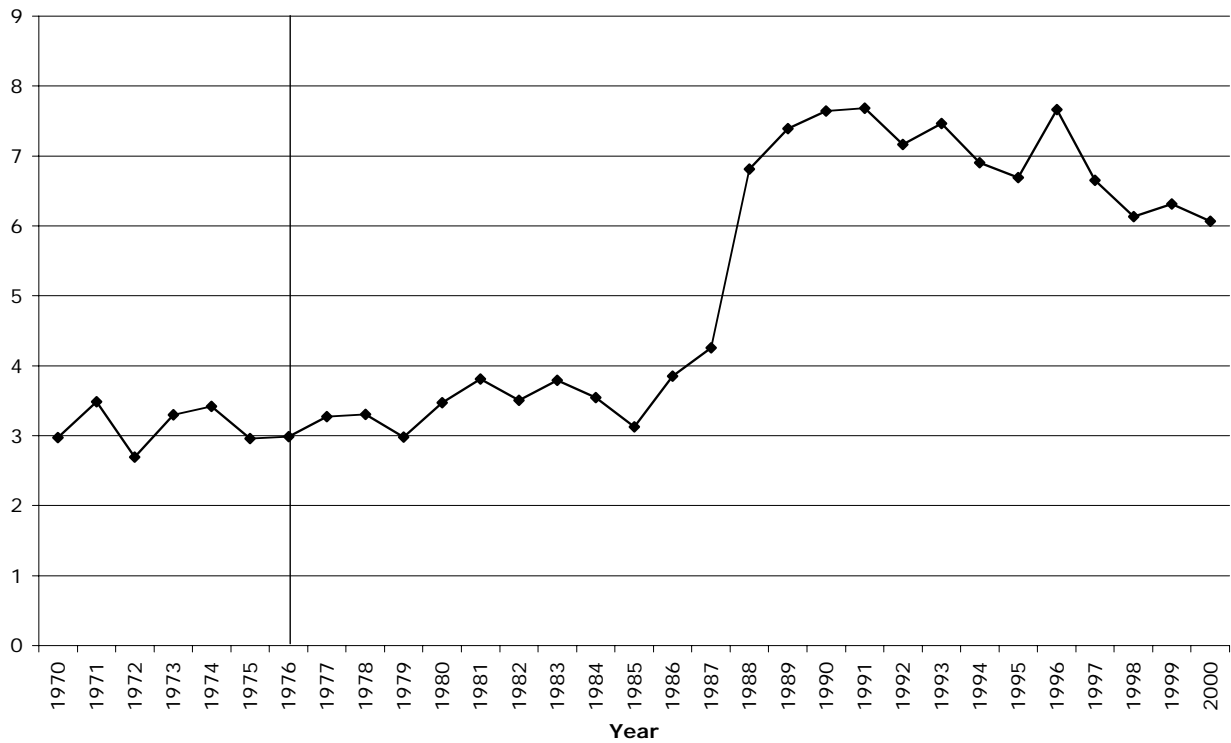
These drops and subsequent increases were much larger than any changes in neighboring Maryland and Virginia. For example, the District's murder rate fell from 3.5 to 3 times more than in the neighboring states and rose back to 3.8 times more within five years. After the ban was implemented the ratio of the murder rates between D.C. and neighboring Maryland and Virginia never fell below the rate seen in either 1975 or 1976. In other words, the relative gap between D.C.'s and Maryland and Virginia's murder rates are never reduced after the D.C. ban.

Advocates of the ban point out how much murder rates have fallen since the mid-1990s as a measure of the handgun ban's success,² but it is clear from the previous graphs that the starting point picked for comparisons was well above the crime rates when the ban went into effect. It is hard to see that evidence showing the current murder rate is still 30 percent above the pre-ban level as evidence of the ban's success. Nor is it particularly obvious why one should assume that the benefits of the law will only start kicking almost twenty years after the ban was passed. A more obvious explanation is that those crime rates were near the height of the crack epidemic and various problems with the operation of the police department.

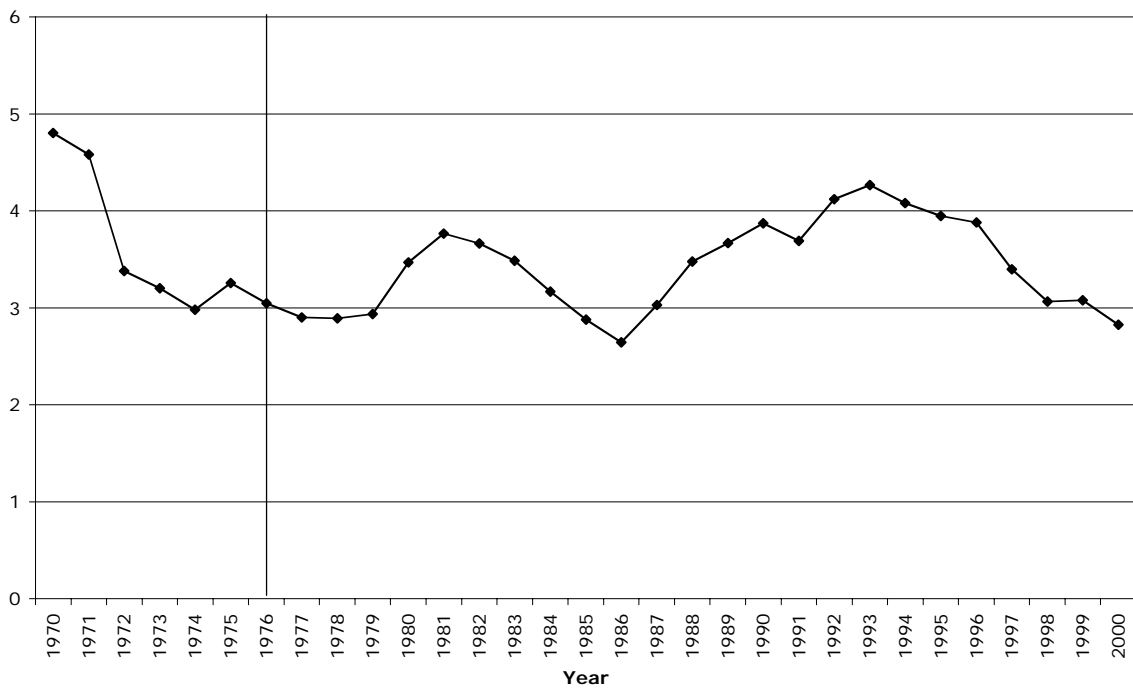
"The city has worked too hard to achieve our 20-year low in homicides to now allow a reversal with the introduction of guns in homes, in the workplace, and on any property a resident owns."

² Ibid.

Comparing D.C.'s Murder Rate to the Average Murder Rate in Maryland and Virginia

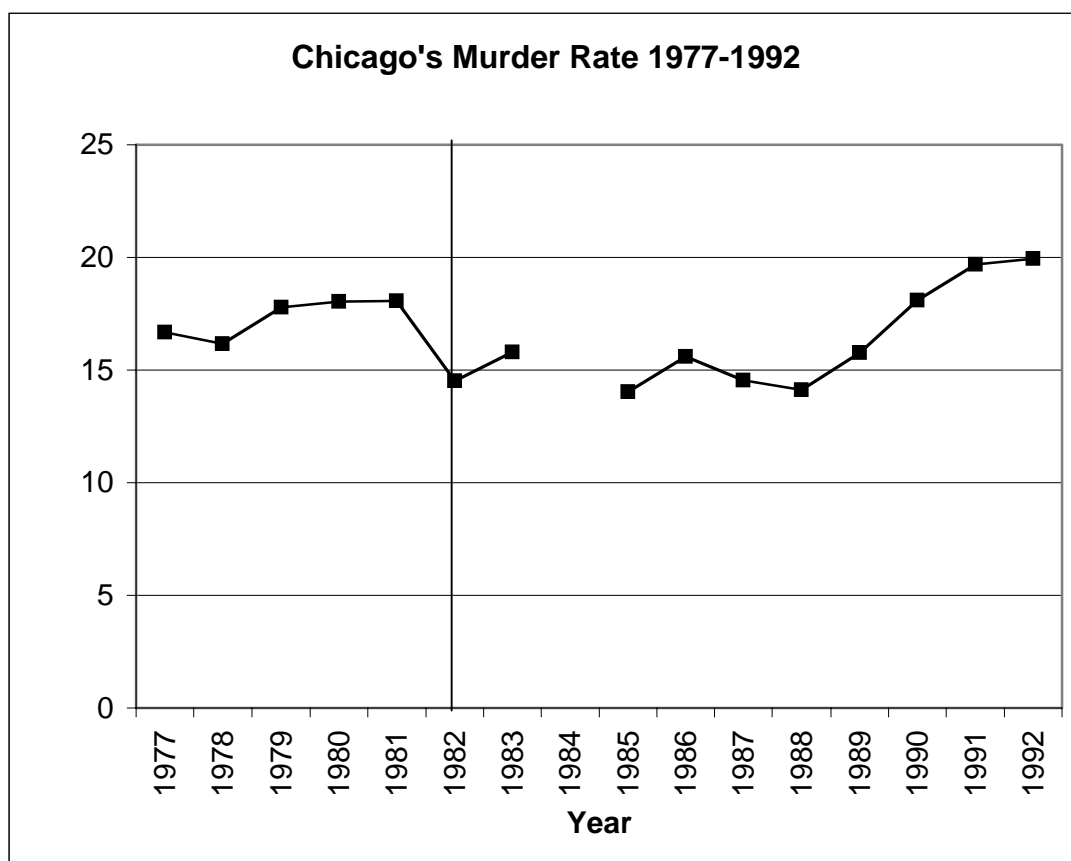


Comparing D.C.'s Violent Crime Rate to the Average Violent Crime Rate in Maryland and Virginia

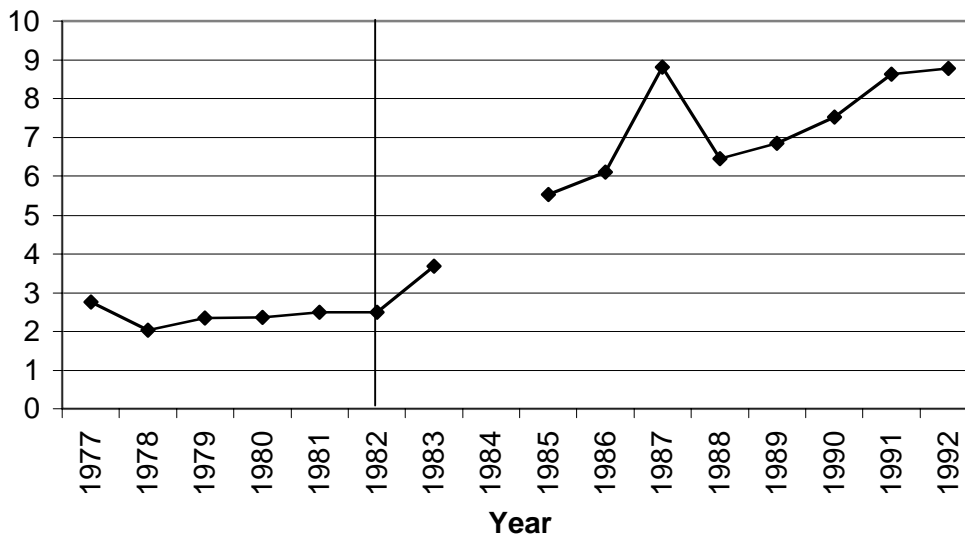


The District does face some severe crime problems unrelated to the gun ban. Although it has improved in recent years, the District's police force still fights a legacy of corruption and incompetence: Under city hiring rules, police can't use even basic intelligence tests to screen applicants. Department computer systems don't work and officers sometimes have trouble finding functional patrol cars. During the early 1990s, as Congress demanded that the city improve police staffing, the city failed to conduct even basic background checks. As a result, there are officers still on the force and subject to civil service protections who have criminal records so severe that they cannot work the streets or testify in court. The city's poor neighborhoods, likewise, rank among the worst in the country, and community-police cooperation suffers just about everywhere.

But even cities with far better police agencies have seen crime soar in the wake of handgun bans. Chicago, which banned all handguns since 1982, has police computer systems that are the envy of the nation, a bevy of shiny new police facilities and a productive working relationship with community groups. Indeed, the city has achieved impressive reductions in property crime in recent years. But the gun ban didn't work at all when it came to reducing violence. Chicago's murder rate fell from 27 to 22 per 100,000 in the five years before the law and then rose slightly to 23. Between 1982 and 2003 there was only one year when the murder rate was even slightly lower than it was when the ban was instituted in 1982. (Chicago did not report its crime data to the FBI for 1984. Chicago also did not report its rape cases in a way consistent with the FBI reporting rules so the violent crime graph excludes rapes.)

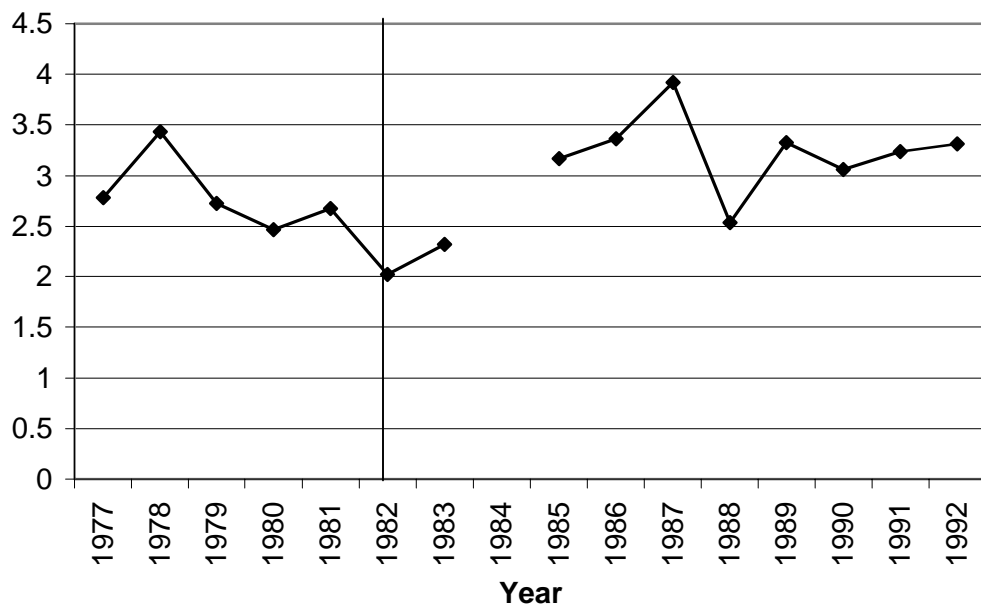


Comparing Chicago's Violent Crime Rate to the Average Violent Crime Rate in Adjacent Counties in Illinois and Indiana (Rape is excluded from the Calculations because of Chicago's Nonstandard Reporting Problems.)

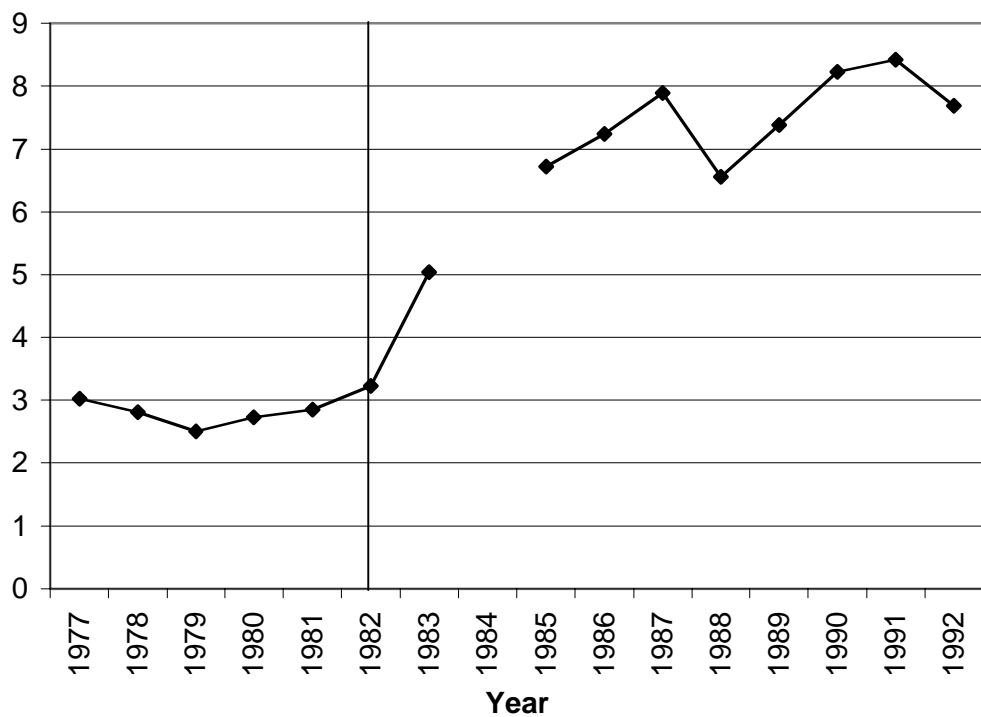


The change is even more dramatic when compared to five neighboring Illinois and Indiana counties: Chicago's murder rate fell from being 5.4 times greater than its neighbors in 1977 to 3 times in 1982, and then went back up to 6.1 times greater in 1987. The robbery data is quite dramatic showing that Chicago's robbery rates remained at three times the average of adjacent counties until immediately after the ban when Chicago's robbery rates soared to eight times greater than its neighbors after five years.

Comparing Chicago's Murder Rate to the Average Murder Rate in Adjacent Counties in Illinois and Indiana



Comparing Chicago's Robbery Rate to the Average Robbery Rate in Adjacent Counties in Illinois and Indiana



In other words, crime rates actually improved prior to these bans and then deteriorated after they took effect. Even though guns will leak into the District and Chicago from neighboring areas, at least some minor benefit still should have been observed if gun bans did indeed reduce crime. Instead, the opposite was the case. The gun bans appear to have disarmed mainly law-abiding citizens while leaving criminals free to prey on the populace.

There are also lessons to learn from gun bans in other countries. From Britain to Australia, promises of lower crime rates from gun control have turned into historic increases in crime.

While the normal knee-jerk solutions are to press for even more controls, once guns are banned, the explanation that the laws failed simply because they didn't go far enough becomes preposterous.

All these experiments were adopted under what gun-control advocates would argue were ideal conditions. Both countries adopted laws that applied to the entire country. Australia and Britain are surrounded by water, and thus do not have the easy smuggling problem that Washington, DC might suffer from.

Take the United Kingdom: With new data showing violent crime soaring, Britain's home secretary announced legislation this month that would impose an outright ban on many toy guns.

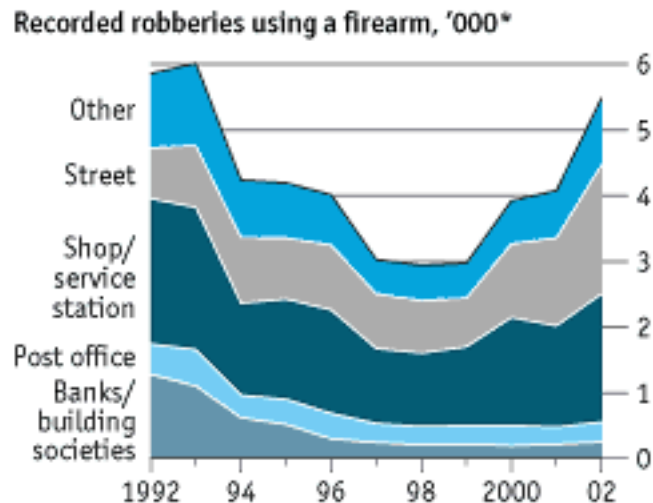
Britain has already banned just about every type of weapon that a criminal might want to use. Handguns were made illegal in 1997, and nearly every other firearm (even BB guns) is now subject to a complex regulatory regime.

Twice As Dangerous

The laws didn't do what was claimed. The British government recently reported that gun crime in England and Wales nearly doubled in the four years from 1998-99 to 2002-03. The serious violent crime rate soared by 64%, and overall violent crime by 118%.³ According to the International Crime Victimization Survey, the violent crime rate in England and Wales now stands at twice the rate of that in the U.S..⁴ A figure published in the Economist Magazine last year (January 3, 2004) clearly illustrates how armed robberies were changing in Britain before and after their January 1997 handgun ban. Prior to the ban, armed robberies were falling dramatically. After the ban, armed robberies stopped falling and started rising.

³ Gordon Barclay & Cynthia Tavares, "International comparisons of criminal justice statistics 2000," Home Office Statistical Bulletin, October 24, 2003

⁴ The 2000 International Crime Victimization Survey (<http://ruljis.leidenuniv.nl/group/jfcr/www/icvs/>).

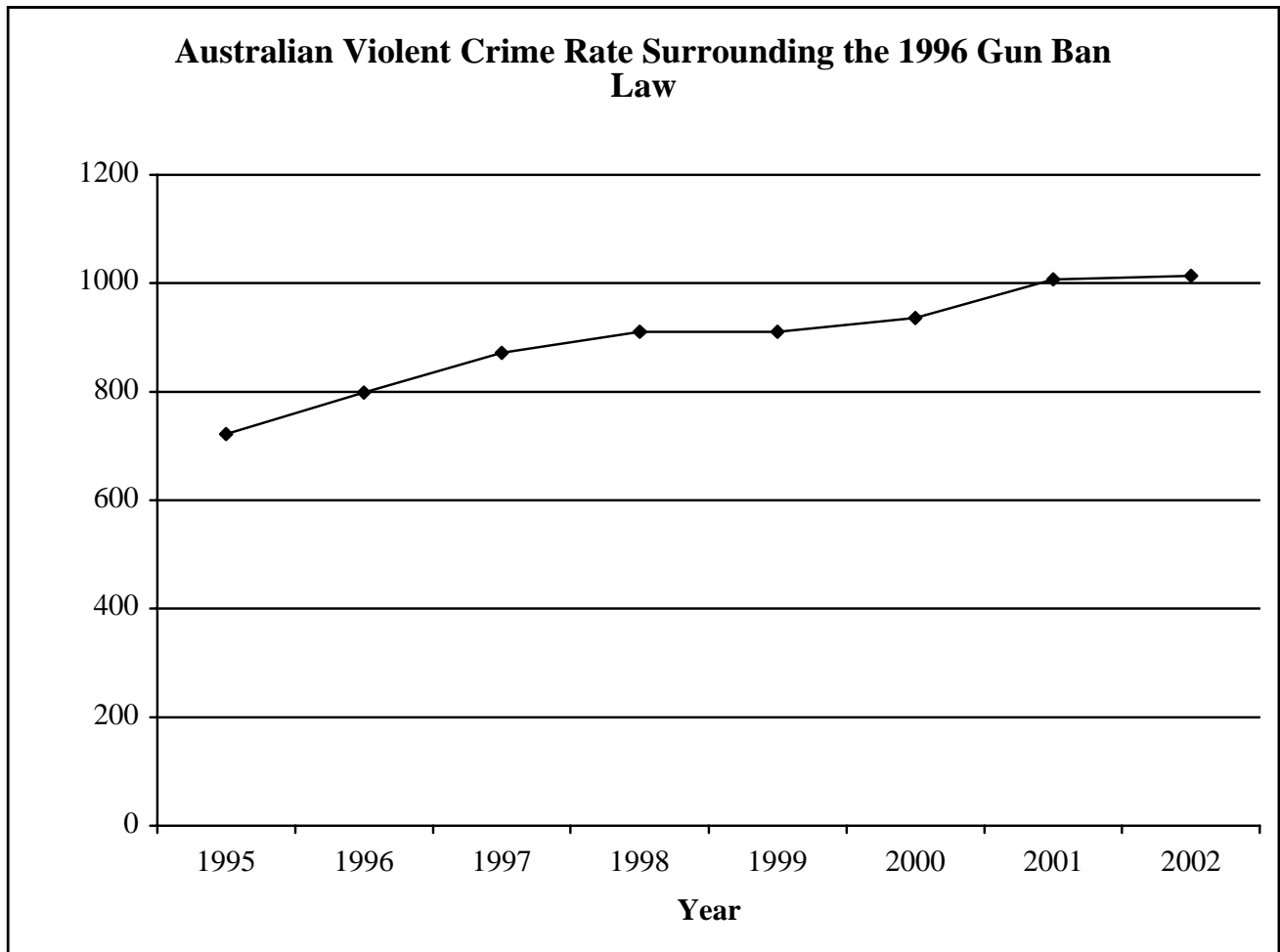


Source: Home Office *Financial years ending March from 1998

Australia also saw its violent crime rates soar after its 1996 Port Arthur gun-control measures banned most firearms. Violent crime rates averaged 32% higher in the six years after the law was passed (from 1997 to 2002) than they did the year before the law went into effect.⁵ Armed robbery rates increased 74%. According to the International Crime Victimization Survey, Australia's violent crime rate is also now double that of the U.S..⁶

⁵<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/ABS@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/08238ef609c9178eca256b35001967d0!OpenDocument>

⁶ The 2000 International Crime Victimization Survey (<http://ruljis.leidenuniv.nl/group/jfcr/www/icvs/>).



Guns do not tell the whole story: Gangs, police and prisons also play a major role. Drug gangs can't simply call up the police when another gang encroaches on their turf, so they end up establishing their own armies and committing a great many murders.

The U.S. has long had a sophisticated and violent gang subculture that the nation's decentralized system of 16,500 police agencies has had a difficult time handling. England's more centralized 45-agency police did a better job fighting gangs, but, over time, the gangs have become more violent, sophisticated and apt at acquiring guns. This has led to rising gun crime.

Police and prisons probably also account for some of the difference in crime, though it doesn't explain why the difference has grown so suddenly. The U.S. also has more police per capita than the U.K., particularly in its big cities: New York and London are roughly the same size, but New York has about 40,000 police officers to London's 29,000.

Failed Policies

The U.S. also locks up many more criminals: Nearly 500 out of 1 million Americans are serving time behind bars as compared to about 150 per 1 million in the other English-speaking countries. America, quite simply, keeps more bad guys behind bars where they can't commit crimes.

Repealing gun control laws might not solve the crime problems in the District of Columbia overnight, but the exploding crime rates (including gun crime) in cities and countries that have banned guns shows that we can add gun control to the list of government planning efforts that do not live up to their billing. Its failures have become too overwhelming to ignore.